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# **Political Cinema in Latin America: From Nation-building to Cultural Translation**

**Armida de la Garza**

Historically, film and politics in Latin America have been closely related. Indeed, “for the modernist tradition, the cinema was the art form and mass medium specific to the twentieth century that could provide the formal frame within which key issues of radical aesthetics could find expression” (Mulvey 2003: 263), and as Laura Mulvey notes this was especially so in Latin America. It has been widely held, however, that under the ‘postmodern condition’ of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, utopian ideas of social progress were abandoned, and the belief in the transformative power of art and the media in general, and cinema and particular, was put into question. A number of insightful and sophisticated theories seeking to reconceptualise politics in altogether less grand, more provisional terms have been put forward. One of these has been to recast the political as the means whereby individuals cope with the anomie, precariousness and atomization of postmodernity, from social into personal terms (Bauman 2007; Berlant 2011). Even those who see the ‘new’, digital media as delivering utopias of activism and participation cast these in terms of individuals or life-style communities, rather than in terms of citizenship. Another way is to conceive of the political as a way of finding the means to disrupt the fit whereby each one of us is “socially plugged” into the system by culture, a capacity to create “a dissociation between the work of the arms and the activity of the gaze [... a disruption of] the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations” (Rancière 2009: 70-72). But these subversive acts are temporary only.

In the paragraphs that follow, I first provide a brief overview of the relation between cinema and politics in Latin America during the 20th Century, before contesting the view that the postmodern has meant abandonment of aspirations to social justice in the region, or indeed a decline of the nation-state as widely held. I will then look at the role of indigenous peoples on film and argue that cinema, in its digital and transnational incarnation, continues to play an important role in redefining multicultural national identities.

### **Cinema and Politics: Nation-building and the Public Sphere**

It could be argued that cinema was used politically in Latin America from its inception. During the 20th Century, cinema became a privileged site where the political goals of the leaders that started the wars for independence in the subcontinent a century earlier eventually took shape and were, to variable extents, achieved (De La Garza, 2012). These goals included the overturning of hierarchies of European domination; broadening citizenship so as to include mestizos, indigenous and black people, and, later in the century, women; and last, to unify what had been the Spanish empire into a single Latin American nation, *la patria grande*. There were various ways in which cinema was central here. First, building on Benedict Anderson's arguments on the role of the printed media bringing about national public spheres (Anderson, 1991), it has been argued that cinema helped broaden citizenship by quickly becoming a leisure activity that cut across class and gender cleavages, as it was affordable, did not require literacy, and it was considered a 'respectable' public place for women—especially if compared to its predecessors, theatre and vaudeville (Hansen, 2002). Although this account of cinema was initially developed in relation

to the United States and Western Europe, research on Latin America has found this was the case there too (see, for instance, Noble 2005). Second, from the 1930s, Hollywood genres were frequently adapted, transformed to suit local tastes or used as forms for local content, as Latin American literature and history were the inspiration of early historical films, including foundational national narratives and adaptations (Hart 2004: 5). See for instance *La Guerra Gaucha* (Demare, 1942 Argentina), *La Virgen que forjó una patria* (Bracho, 1942, Mexico) and *Macunaíma* (de Andrade, 1969, Brazil) among others. These narratives sometimes put forward representations of a national ‘we’ that included indigenous and black people, albeit within a framework of assimilation rather than multiculturalism. While initially derided as derivative, inauthentic and poor copies of the ‘original’ Hollywood genres, more recent criticism (Shaw and Dennison 2007; García and Maciel 2001) that places value on both hybridity and popular culture has acknowledged their progressive potential, exerting agency even if the narratives themselves were sometimes conservative.

Throughout the century, documentary filmmaking contributed to the desired overturning of hierarchies of domination. In Mexico, from the early 1900s, the Alva brothers, Jesus H. Abitia, and Salvador Toscano, among others, started recording the military battles of the Mexican revolution. In the 1960s and 1970s, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino’s *La Hora de los Hornos* (1968) in Argentina, and in Chile, Patricio Guzmán’s *La Batalla de Chile* (1972) were instrumental in the struggle against Latin American dictatorships, and foundational of the Third Cinema movement. Last, cinema also provided the grounds for an imagined Latin American community. A large part of what is labelled ‘Mexican’ cinema—the most prolific in the region at the time—often included actors, crews, music and plots from Cuba and

Argentina, and the films from Mexico and Argentina also often circulated across the subcontinent and indeed, even among the Latin American diasporas in the United States, a fact that has allowed Marvin D'Lugo to trace “the beginnings of an aural bonding of a Hispanic transnational community” in the tango film and the *comedia ranchera* during the first half of the 20th Century (D'Lugo 2010: 163).<sup>1</sup> Latin American art cinema—such as the ‘imperfect cinema’ movement in Cuba, and Cinema nôvo in Brazil—was also political in that it aimed to raise consciousness in viewers, and ultimately, to achieve social justice. In Latin America in the 1960s, “belief in the cinema merge[d] with belief in radical political change [...] so, a commitment to social transformation [...] and a commitment to the cinema’s place in enabling that transformation [...] work[ed] together” (Mulvey 2003: 263).

### **The ‘Multiplex’: Privatization and Commodification**

As for the role that cinema has played in the politics of the subcontinent in 21st Century, this remains contested. One account maintains this role changed with the rise of neoliberal economic policies, the onset of postmodernity and the “death of metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1984), including the narrative of social progress. With the retreat of the state from all sectors of the economy, not least from the film industries of Mexico, Brazil and Argentina, and the large-scale privatization that followed, these industries declined in the 1980s and 1990s. The lowest point was reached in 1992 and 1993 when only 11 films were made in Mexico, and 10 in Argentina (Falicov 2007: 81). Moreover, this was initially viewed as the end of the Latin American national cinemas proper, with most critics seeing the scant production as almost exclusively devoted to commercial, light comedies (for instance, Alfonso Cuarón’s *Opera Prima*, *Sólo con tu Pareja* (1991) and Antonio Serrano’s *Sexo, Pudor y Lágrimas*/*Sex, Shame*

*and Tears* (1999)) narrowly appealing to the middle classes—the main audience of the then new, and expensive, multiplex cinemas—or soft porn. The larger, properly ‘national’ or mass audiences for cinema became fragmented.

Other accounts, however, contest this narrative, and see political engagement in recent Latin American cinema, despite its ‘commercial’ label. Laura Podalsky’s reading of recent Cuban, Mexican, Brazilian and Argentine cinema as political, grounded on a Deleuzian understanding of affect in which the films are valued for their capacity to elicit “qualities of experience” and to “help name, codify or channel lived intensities” (2011: 12-13), holds that genre and other types of middle brow cultural production can “encourage an embodied recognition of loss” or “invite spectators to feel as a means of questioning their knowledge of recent history” (2011: 20). *Madagascar* (Pérez, 1993), *Amores Perros/Love’s a Bitch* (González Iñárritu, 2000) and *O Que É Isso, Companheiro/Four Days in September* (Barreto, 1997) are some of the films from Cuba, Mexico and Brazil, respectively, that she analyses through this framework. Luisela Alvaray and Joana Page too maintain some of the Latin American cinema that is derided as commercial and apolitical, notably genres such as horror, have in fact become ways of engaging deeply traumatic history, for instance, the legacy of dictatorship in Argentina (Alvaray, 2013), and also an equally traumatic recent past, as regards the economic crisis (1999-2002) (Page, 2009). Primary instances here are *El túnel de los huesos* (Garassino, 2011) and *Nueve Reinas/Nine Queens* (Bielinski, 2000).

I would like to argue, however, that although some contemporary Latin American cinema is certainly apolitical, and although there is a case that the political can now

be cast in terms of the personal or re-imagined within the narrow terms of the commodified as described above, there is also a strand of Latin American cinema that remains political in the former utopian sense, namely concerned with broad social transformation, dealing with issues of citizenship and the nation-state. Here I will refer to the cinema that is about or made by Latin American indigenous people, a field of film production, and film studies, that has been growing increasingly. To this end, I shall draw from theorists such as Walter Mignolo (2010) and Arturo Escobar (2004) that contest the view of the present as apolitical, to focus instead on the many counter-hegemonic movements that have emerged in opposition to globalization, movements in which indigenous peoples, and importantly their cinema, have been crucial. In a sharp contrast to the influential account of modernity as the progressive diffusion of European enlightenment famously espoused by Anthony Giddens and others, with its processes of urbanization and industrialization that flow from Europe to the rest of the world, Mignolo and Escobar see it rather as constitutive of colonialism. Not only because the European 'progress' in this narrative could not have taken place without the control, domination and exploitation of the Americas, starting with the Spanish and Portuguese conquest in the sixteenth century and disguised in the language of salvation, but also because indigenous people became the Other, savage, uncivilized and objectified, against which Europeans could emerge as the subjects of history. They also contest whether this 'stage' has ended at all, arguing instead for its continuation in the neoliberalist policies adopted today by most states. I further follow Robert Stam, Richard Porton and Leo Goldsmith's contention that

Against the grain of the assumption that political modernism is the only path to subversive aesthetics, we argue that the old and the archaic can be

mobilized in favour of the new and the radical [...] Alternative aesthetics deeply rooted in millennial traditions, such as oral epic, Menippean satire, and carnivalesque inversion [...] bear perennial relevance; they remain always already available for renewal (Stam et al. 2015, forthcoming).

This is indeed the case with indigenous cinema in the subcontinent. It is inherently political, I would argue, first, in that the national identities of the Latin American states were from the start constituted in relation to the ‘Indian’, whether “as the enemy to be massacred and displaced, or as the recuperated symbol of national difference from Europe” (Stam, Porton, & Goldsmith, 2015, forthcoming). The status of indigenous peoples vis-a-vis the nation-state on its own presents an ongoing political challenge. Second, while the dispossession and injustice that indigenous peoples suffer is not only social and economic, but also epistemological, since imperialism has led to the disparaging of alternative knowledges (Santos, 2005), contemporary communication technologies, including digital cinema, have enabled indigenous worldviews and knowledge to be put forward and circulated, facilitating resistance. These worldviews are centred around community and participation, especially around shared forms of ownership of land and resources that go beyond the concept of property. Land and resources are instead viewed as organically related to the community, perennial and sacred. Indigenous societies are based on intergenerational commitment, and stand in sharp contrast to the advanced warfare, urban congestion and environmental degradation that have come with modernisation. Being able to express and circulate these worldviews through the many options afforded by digital cinema makes it a possibility not only that alternative



modernizations may emerge, but in fact that “alternatives to modernization” (Escobar, 2004) might become viable.

Importantly, both Escobar and Boaventura de Sousa Santos have acknowledged the need for translation processes that make cross-cultural understanding possible. Here the potential of cinema is obviously paramount. In a similar vein, Mignolo speaks of contact zones where “Western knowledge and subjectivity, control of land and labour, of authority, and ways of living [...] have been ‘contacting’ other languages, memories, principles of knowledge and belief, forms of government and economic organization since 1500” (Mignolo, 2010). It is in these contact zones, he argues, that the epistemic colonization, that is, the violent suppression of alternative forms of knowledge that has been taking place can be subverted. Cinema can be conceptualized as such a contact zone as well, and therefore becomes a significant locus for acts of subversion as I will demonstrate in the following sections.

### **The Transnational: Re-Politicizing Latin American Cinema**

Here I shall take the metaphor of translation further, to discuss the ways in which two transnational films from Latin America, *Eréndira Ikikunari* (Mora, 2006) and *También la Lluvia/Even the Rain* (Bollaín, 2010),<sup>2</sup> translate, as it were, indigenous worldviews to non-indigenous audiences.

Translation is about engagement with the Other, and issues of power are at stake.<sup>3</sup> It is never simply a hermeneutic task, about rendering the foreign intelligible. For as Mona Baker has pointed out, although often overlooked, there is agency in the translator (Baker, 2006). Choices are made as to the lexicon, grammatical structures, and

particularly framing strategies, that render a translation ‘fluent’, that is, that create the illusion of transparency. And

[...] most publishers, reviewers and readers regard a translation as acceptable when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text—the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the ‘original’ (Venuti [1995] 2008: 1).

However, this kind of translation actually both performs and hides “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values” (Venuti [1995] 2008: 20) leaving, so to speak, the reader ‘in peace’, while moving the author towards her. This is why Lawrence Venuti has called this strategy ‘domestication’ of the source text, pointing out that its widespread use in translations to English has engendered parochialism, as all cultures are made to sound like contemporary fluent English. He has proposed instead a strategy of ‘foreignization’ in which the translation registers difference, as a strategy of resistance (Venuti [1995] 2008: 305-6). Some of the strategies that have been advocated to jar the reader with an heterogeneous discourse include adhering as closely as possible to the source text structure and syntax, the use of calques, the use of archaic structures and even of British English when translating for American audiences. When foreignising a translation, the translator leaves the writer in peace, moving the reader towards the writer, thus ‘sending the reader abroad’ (Robinson, 1997, p. 1).

Extending the concepts of foreignisation and domestication to the analysis of films on or by indigenous people as cultural translations, I use them here to analyse *Eréndira Ikikunari* and *Even the Rain* as these films are clear instances of each strategy, which many others inevitably follow. I argue with Venuti for foreignisation as the more ethical choice and the one that further advances the film's political agenda.

### ***Eréndira Ikikunari***

Indigenous peoples have featured frequently in the national productions of Latin America (Franco, 1993), but as mentioned above, this was mostly in narratives of assimilation that upheld the nation-state. In the 1990s however, a revisionist project started that aimed to put forward an indigenous point of view, or “an attempt at the re-writing of history” (Haddu, 2007). Salvador Carrasco's *La Otra Conquista/The Other Conquest* (1998) is seminal in this respect. It tells the story of the conquest in what may be called a bilingual and bi-cultural way, presenting, for every alleged Indian ‘atrocities’, such as human sacrifice, the many Spanish-perpetrated massacres,<sup>4</sup> and pointing to the way an equivalence was historically forged between the Aztec goddess Tonantzin (our mother), and the Virgin Mary that eventually led to the syncretism that facilitated the conquest, and later the formation of the nation-state in what is Mexico today. Further, the film highlights the role of the visual image in the process of documenting alternative versions of the conquest, as its protagonist, a scribe called Topilzin, is frequently shown recording scenes of the battles and destruction by means of painting [\(image 1\)](#).



For all its merits, however, the film is still told through a Western aesthetics, realism, frequently drawing from the Bible for dialogues, even if spoken in náhuatl, and casting Topilzin, in a role of self-sacrifice similar to that of Jesus Christ. For instance, when contemplating the scale of the destruction Topilzin is recording on the Codex he is working on, it is “My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?” that he cries.

The Western perspective is also frequently conveyed visually through the mise-en-scene. For instance, when Topilzin is first introduced to Cortés, the scene, shot with the camera taking the point of view of a statue of the Virgin Mary (image 2), resembles a game of chess, with the white King (Cortés) and the white Knight (his Lieutenant) clearly placed on the board, while the role of the Queen is ambiguously taken by Marina/Malinzin, the indigenous princess that received historical accounts blame for siding with the Spaniards. The film nonetheless redeems her as she seeks to save Topilzin’s life by convincing Cortés that is not a pawn in the struggle, but a son of the late Emperor, Moctezuma. Notably, as a fluent speaker of both Náhuatl and Spanish Malinzin is herself most valuable to all characters as a translator, and she frequently uses this role to further the indigenous cause.



While the film's intervention bringing alternative versions of the 'discovery' of the Americas is thus welcome, as is its suggestion that the contact zone had an impact both ways, it ends up being less heteroglossic than it might have seemed. From Venuti's point of view, *La Otra Conquista* has more of a domesticating role in both its form and content, focusing as it does on the central role of religion, both among indigenous peoples and Spain in the sixteenth century, and in much of Latin America up to this day.

On the other hand, Juan Mora's *Eréndira Ikikunari* does take a step forward. It is based on an Indigenous (Purépecha) legend, of a young girl who, in the words of the director, "became an icon of bravery during the destruction of her world by the Spanish conquistadors when she captured and learned to ride one of the Spaniards' horses, which must have seemed as terrifying creatures to the natives" (Mora [quoted in Caballero](#) 2010). Eréndira thus became a symbol of resistance, female agency, and the preservation of indigenous cultures. Indigenous actors were cast, often acting for the first time, and although the film is nominally bilingual, Spanish characters have minimal dialogues, so that it is nearly all in what seems to most viewers a foreign language. Without being didactic, the film gives equal attention to conveying what is

known today about indigenous ways of governance and social organization, the plot of Eréndira's preparation for her achievement, and the eventual defeat of her people. It highlights internal divisions amongst the Indigenous cultures, and sometimes even within the same culture, as a major reason why the Conquest became possible.

Significantly, in a major departure from the films made during the 20th Century, realism has been rejected in favour of a more surrealistic rendition of the story. One of the strategies to aesthetically put forward an indigenous point of view was to have the Spanish characters wear masks for the first part of the film (image 3), until one of them is killed and bleeds. At that point, the Indians realise that the Spaniards are human rather than Gods, and the actor's face is shown for the first time. From then on, masks disappear and Spanish actors' faces become visible.



The masks that were chosen for these scenes are used in Indigenous traditional dances from the region (image 3). And in a further attempt to draw from indigenous practices of visual representation, various scenes are introduced via juxtaposition with an animated version of the painted Codex of the legend that guided the mise-en-scene,

the animation then gradually fading and giving way to actors (image 4). At other times, actors and settings fully interact with the Codex animations, as when Eréndira remembers there was once a brave woman warrior that she seeks to emulate. This gives the film a very haptic feeling. This is important because in some accounts on the origins of cinema, film is understood as inherently imperialistic in that it continues the efforts to represent a three-dimensional space on a bi-dimensional surface from the point of view of the individual subject of the Renaissance, a highly ideological project that sought to make of human vision the rule of representation (Aumont 1992).

Counter to this approach is haptic visuality, an approach to pictorial representation typical of non-western cultures who “prefer to process representations as if they were independent objects that exist out there, all by themselves, regardless of any producing or receiving agency” (Dalle Vacche 2003: 5), outside of the perspectival regime of the West. To Laura U. Marks haptic cinema “tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture” and can be described “like an act of touching through visual perception” (Marks, 2000, p. 162). Thus *Eréndira*’s haptic aesthetics eschew a Western tradition of representation that has been regarded as imperialistic in nature, in that it seeks mastery over the depicted world, firmly aligning it with the tradition of the indigenous culture it seeks to represent.



Unlike *La Otra Conquista*, which also quotes images from Codex by first presenting shots of the ‘reality’ being painted by Topilzin (see image 1), then showing how he is capturing this in his paintings, *Eréndira* proceeds the other way round. The Codex, massive and occupying half the screen, is the source, it is its story that we see unfolding (image 4). And unlike the chessboard of *La Otra Conquista*, *Eréndira* begins the story quoting the square or quadrilineal universe in which indigenous people from these regions believed (image 4), where cardinal directions were represented by a deity and her/his corresponding colour, number as cosmological cycle. These most effective foreignization strategies powerfully succeed in representing an indigenous worldview based on community and with a close relationship with nature in which women had agency, potentially encouraging activism.<sup>5</sup> And as Mora puts it, it was digital cinema that allowed him to shoot such a poetic, visually hunting epic with a budget of merely 14 million MXN (around £658,900).

### ***También la Lluvia/Even the Rain***

*También la Lluvia/Even the Rain* is perhaps the quintessential transnational film, a Mexico-Spain-France co-production, starring Gael García Bernal and Luis Tosar, written by Paul Laverty. It tells the story of a group of Spanish actors and crew, who



are making a film on the ‘discovery’ of the Americas in Bolivia—the city of Cochabamba standing for the Hispaniola, the Caribbean island on the territory of present day Haiti and Dominican Republic, where Columbus first encountered Indigenous American people—when the fighting started that led to the nationalization of water and eventually to the rise of Evo Morales to the presidency of that country, a movement now called ‘the Water Wars’, in 2000. In this way, the film is able to set parallels between the European colonization of the land in the 1500s, driven by a search for gold, and the contemporary attempts at colonization by transnational corporations, driven by a search to control natural resources such as oil and water.

Prior to being co-opted by advertising, reflexivity in film was long held to be inherently progressive. Calling attention to the fiction’s mode of construction, and to its status as fiction, were regarded as tools that would enable Brechtian distanciation and the awakening of conscience, facilitating engagement, in-depth understanding of the mechanisms of social oppression, and critique. The film-within-the-film device has often played this role, rendering the apparent transparency and immediacy of its visual representations a problematic construct. By their very nature these films focus on performance, since their plots rely on problems or situations actors face or encounter. In *También la Lluvia/Even the Rain* the film that the actors are working on carefully documents the many injustices suffered by the Indigenous peoples at the hands of the conquistadors, including enslavement, torture and genocide, as well as the (often timid) efforts of a divided Catholic Church at playing the role of a moral compass. The film on their tribulations making the film tells the story of the present-day injustices the Indigenous peoples continue to suffer at the hands of the present-day conquistadors, with the filmmakers themselves seemingly taking over the role

claimed for the Church before. Introducing a further layer of reflexivity, some scenes present an assistant camera woman recording interviews and general footage for what will be ‘the making of’ the film, all of these in black and white, in contrast to the previous two stories, which are in colour, thus drawing a further equivalence between them. Dialogues often quote original texts from the letters Columbus and other conquistadors sent the Queen and King of Spain, speeches given by the Fathers of the Church and the missionaries who defended the Indians, highlighting their high moral ground as precursors of the doctrine of human rights, and arguments made by the present-day high-priests of neoliberalism, here the Washington-supported Bolivian president at the time, Hugo Banzer (and later Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada). In a Socratic fashion, the viewer sees the debate unfolding as positions for and against the privatization of water are played out between government representatives and the film actors and crew. But the story takes a turn from the social to the personal as the plot unfolds when the director and the producer’s fears that the Indian main actor, Daniel, is becoming involved leading the demonstrations against the privatization of water, getting beaten and even sent to prison, endangering the completion of their film. The plot thus advances through narrating their efforts to ensure Daniel’s participation, and this brings about character change, as Costa, the producer, moves from his initial cynicism to ethical responsibility and care.

The film’s focus on the plight of the Indigenous peoples of Latin America, on long-standing injustice and on the specific present-day threat posed to the whole of humanity by the scarcity of resources such as water, along with the present day incarnation of exploitation as transnational capital certainly resonates with the aims and objectives of the counter-hegemonic movements regarded by Mignolo, Escobar

and others as the real sources of radicalism today. From this point of view, it certainly is a prime example of the kind of committed filmmaking intending to raise awareness and possibly elicit action. However, as the plot unfolds, the film continuously undermines its own progressive agenda.

From the beginning, the establishing shot of a Bolivian shantytown where would-be extras are queuing waiting for casting is seen from the perspective of the Spanish actors arriving in a van. This European perspective is maintained throughout, as the film ends up telling the story of *their* awakening, and as they increasingly become protagonists, when the film turns from the social concerns of demonstrations and police violence to the personal realm of Daniel and his daughter, whom the Spanish producer saves from death. The very choice of a young daughter for the indigenous character already renders him vulnerable. Had he had a teenage son instead of a young daughter, the need of the European hero to come to the rescue would not have been as pressing. Thus, in *También la Lluvia/Even the Rain* the indigenous people, who were in fact the protagonists of the water wars and won this struggle—although we never get to see them victorious on the screen—are turned into secondary characters, again objects and not subjects of history, made into eternal victims and in need of the aid and protection of the West, in the past as well as the present.

*También la Lluvia/Even the Rain* also fails to take advantage of the epistemological potential of performance. “From the Platonic point of view, the stage, which is simultaneously a locus of public activity and the exhibition-space for ‘fantasies’, disturbs the clear partition of identities, activities and spaces” (Rancière 2004: 13). Not so for the Spanish actors, who seem condemned to repeating the roles of their

ancestors, as do the Indians. The constructed nature of power, and the ability of indigenous and marginalised knowledge to question and challenge it, is not highlighted. Crucially, the film also misses the opportunity to become a contact zone by incorporating either an indigenous point of view or presenting alternative approaches to ownership of the water and land, or indeed the profound indigenous challenges to the nation-state in general. In sum, despite its excellent choice of frame for its translation strategy, it is too much of a domestication that fails to do justice to the very important concerns that lie at its heart.

## **Conclusion**

As should be evident from the discussion above, cinema and politics have long been closely related in Latin America, and this continues to be the case despite the present context in which the role of the state is much reduced, citizenship has become commodified and the boundaries between the public and the private have become blurred. One of the ways in which this engagement continues to take place is through the participation of Latin American Indigenous people in the various manifestations of visual culture in the region, increasingly as subjects rather than objects. Their worldviews pose both challenges and alternatives to the status quo that cinema, especially in its digital incarnation, can now represent and circulate, contributing in this way to that important process of cross-cultural translation that the Latin American theorists, academics and activists have long been calling for. And while ‘domesticated’ cultural translations can have their merits, as I have argued elsewhere ([De La Garza 2010](#)), especially in contexts when forging consensus is a priority or when they can lead to revising received versions of history, the value of registering difference as a strategy of resistance in its own right cannot be overlooked.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Marvin d'Lugo has proposed an understanding of the *comedia ranchera* centred on a reaction towards modernisation that saw a romanticised version of rural life in pre-revolutionary, quasi feudal *haciendas*, ironically taken to the cinema, the urban new medium of modernity (D'Lugo, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that *Eréndira* has been widely marketed and received as a Mexican film, I here categorize it as transnational rather than national cinema in that “the global language for claiming indigenous status” has allowed tribal communities to emerge “as global subjects and not as national citizens” (Chakrabarty 2006: 239, 241). This is in fact one of the reasons that indigenous cinema is inherently political.

<sup>3</sup> At the level of language, Alfonso Arau has recently launched an initiative, entitled Cidilux Project, to translate Mexican cinema, including his famous *Como Agua para Chocolate/Like Water for Chocolate* (1992), into indigenous languages and show the films in purpose-built theatres in various indigenous communities. The first two have opened in the states of Chihuahua and Oaxaca, and he expects that 5000 such theatres will be operating within 5 years (Arau 2012).

<sup>4</sup> The population of the Americas went from 25 million inhabitants in 1490 prior to the arrival of the Europeans to 700,000 by 1623. Only 3% of the indigenous people survived.

<sup>5</sup> *Eréndira* was shot with indigenous actors, who had the opportunity to tell a story of their community by means of cinema for the first time, generating a sense of empowerment, and providing training with digital media that can be used to continue furthering local agendas. Further, at the indigenous

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communities in Michoacán where it was first screened *Eréndira* generated debate about both received accounts of history, and the indigenous communities present situation of internal division (Caballero 2007)